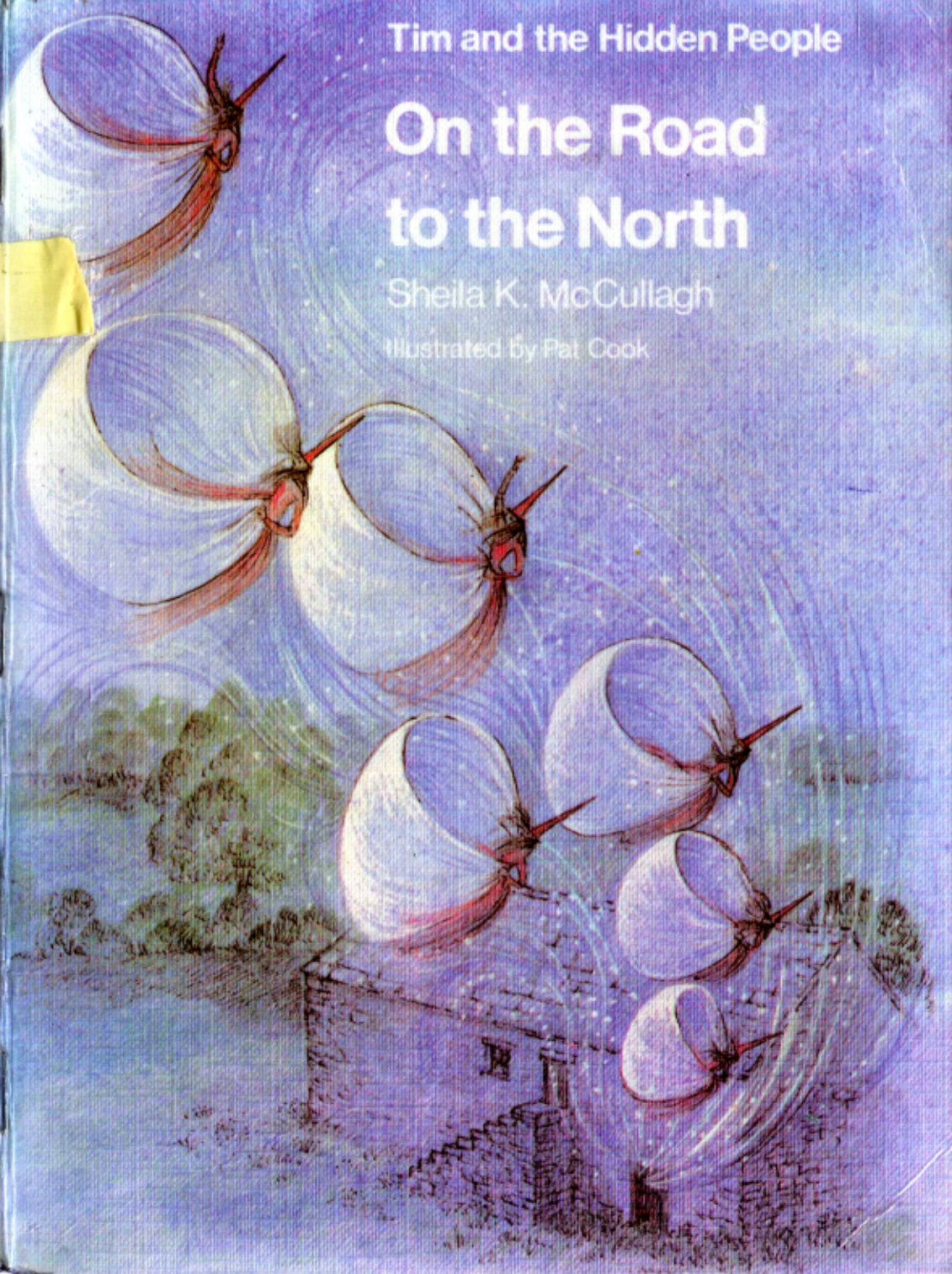


Tim and the Hidden People

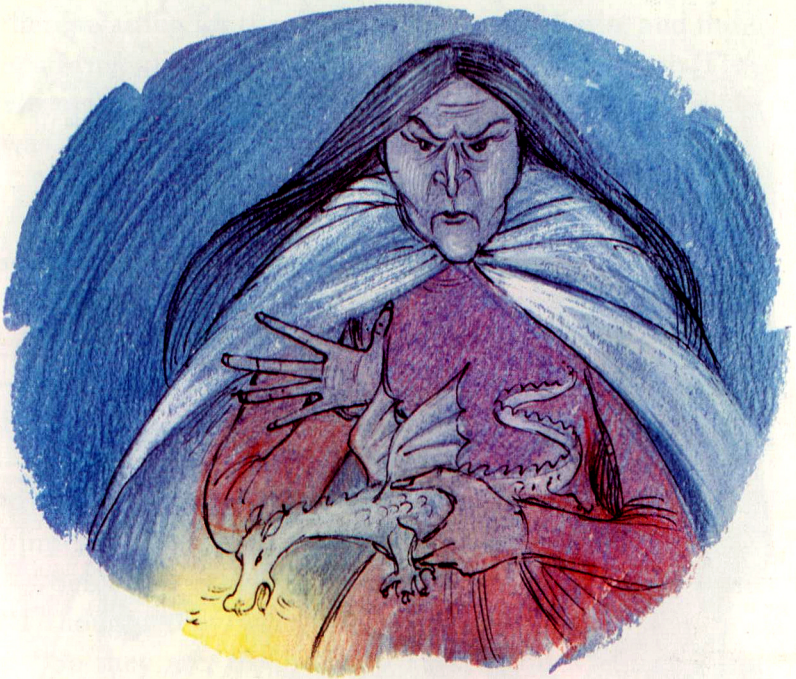
On the Road to the North

Sheila K. McCullagh

Illustrated by Pat Cook

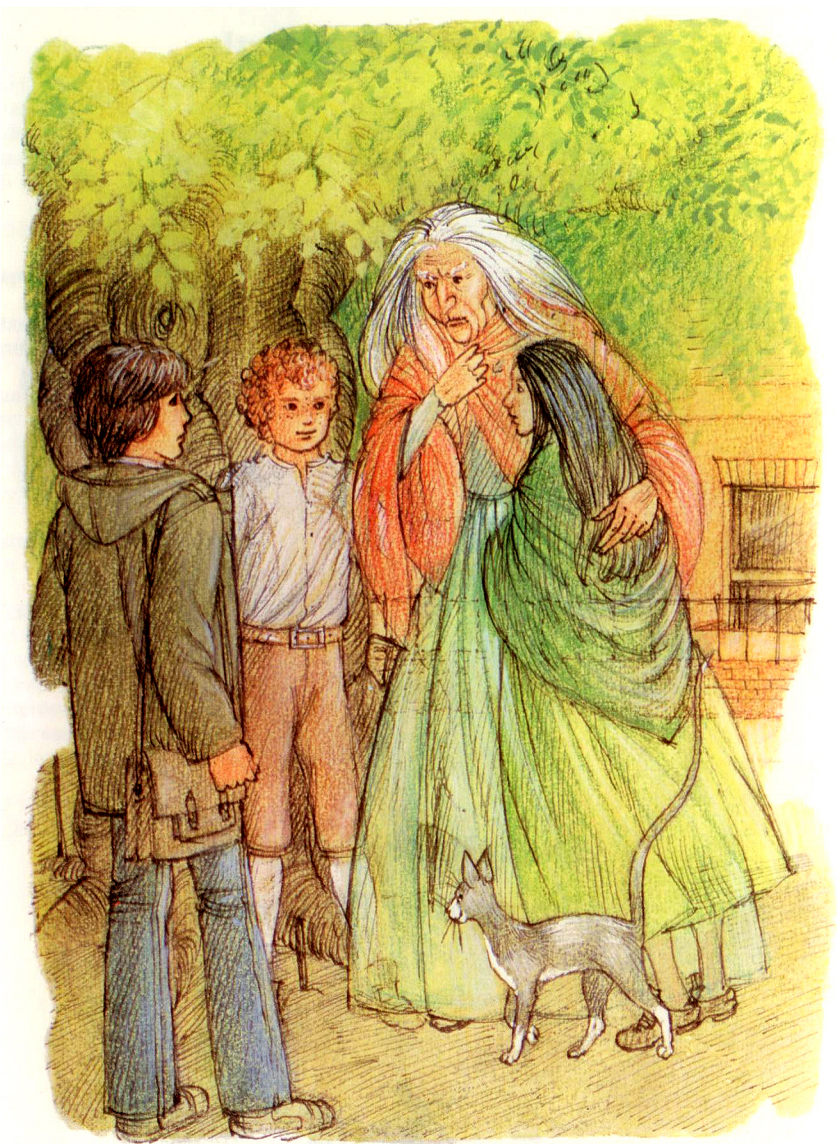


On the Road to the North



Sheila K. McCullagh
Illustrated by Pat Cook


E J Arnold



The two strange children, Nicola and Jeremy, ran across The Yard to the big tree. Tim saw Melinda standing there, waiting for them. Nicola ran to Melinda, and flung her arms around her. That seemed so strange to Tim. He never forgot that Melinda was a witch, even if she was a 'safe' witch.

Melinda looked at him and smiled.

"So you're going with them, Tim?" she said. It sounded like a question.

Tim nodded. "I'll take them up to the north, Melinda –if I can," he said.

"I think you can," said Melinda. "I hope you can. But you must start now."

There was a little purr, and Sebastian dropped out of the tree at their feet. He ran to Nicola, and rubbed himself against her.

"Sebastian can see them!" cried Tim in surprise. "I thought they were invisible."

"So they are, to Ordinary Folk," said Melinda. "But Sebastian is Tobias' son. Didn't you know?"

Tim shook his head.

"Sebastian is one of the Strange Ones, Tim," said Melinda. "His father is one of the Hidden People, but his mother is an ordinary cat. That's why everyone can see him. He can make himself invisible, too, when he wants to –then only the Hidden People can see him. Of course, *you* can see him even then –if you have the magic key, or the silver coin, with you."

“Are there many Strange Ones?” asked Tim.

Melinda nodded. “You may meet some of them, as you go north,” she said. “Their fathers are Hidden People, but their mothers are Ordinary Folk – or the other way round. They’re not all cats – people can be Strange Ones, too. Strange Ones look like Ordinary Folk, and they live like Ordinary Folk. But they can always see the Hidden People, and they can make themselves invisible when they want to.”

“How shall I know them?” asked Tim.

“It’s not always easy to tell,” said Melinda. “But you’ll know, if they can see the children. There’s one of the Strange Ones that I hope you *will* meet. His name is Alan Tremaine. If you meet a man called Alan Tremaine, you can trust him. And now, Tim, this is the way you must go.”

Melinda pulled an old and tattered map out from under her shawl.



“The children’s grandfather lives on an island in the west, far out to sea. The Ordinary Folk used to live there too, but they left long ago. The Hidden People stayed. It’s a lonely place, and a wild, stormy place. The Hidden People like it very well. Grandfather Strome lives there, and he knows you’re coming. I sent an owl to tell him. Look at this map.”

She opened out the map, so that Tim could see it. It showed the west coast of Scotland.

“You couldn’t get out to the island yourselves,” she said. “Unless you took a broomstick, and that’s too dangerous. The wind witches will be flying along that shore. You wouldn’t be safe on your own. Grandfather Strome can change the wind. He’ll bring his boat to this little cove. Look.”

Melinda’s long, bony finger came down on the map.

“It’s called the Cove of the Dark Tower. I’ve marked it with a cross. The cliff juts into the sea at one side of the cove, like a great tower of black rock.

“When you get to the cove, you must light three fires on the top of the dark tower. The sea birds nest on the rocks there. They will take a message to Grandfather Strome, and the next night he’ll bring his boat to the cove. He’ll take the children with him, back to the island.”

“What do I do then?” asked Tim.

“Come home,” said Melinda.

Tim said nothing. He thought of Miss Miff. Melinda looked at him.

“You can go with the children if you want to, Tim,” she said. “Grandfather Strome would take you, too.”

She handed Tim the map. He put it away in the inside pocket of his jacket.

Melinda took out a strange little cut glass bottle. It had a cap like a golden ball, and it was full of something that looked like red fire.



“There will be times when it would be better for you to be invisible yourself, Tim,” she said. “This is one of them.” She took off the top of the bottle, and poured three red drops into the golden ball.

“Drink this, Tim,” she said.

Tim looked at it for a moment, and then drank it. He was sure that he could trust Melinda.

Melinda put on the golden top, and handed the bottle to him.

“Keep this, too, Tim,” she said. “One drop will make you invisible for an hour. You’ll be invisible for three hours now – the Ordinary Folk won’t be able to see you. The Hidden People can still see you, of course, so be careful.

“Now we must go. You must get away from here while the sun is up. You mustn’t travel in the dark. Find somewhere indoors to sleep, when the sun goes down, Tim. Get under a roof if you can, even if it’s only a barn. If you can’t find a barn, hide in a wood until daylight. Come.”

Melinda turned, and walked out of The Yard. The children followed.

* * * * *

Tim stood looking around him for a moment. He wondered how long it would be before he saw The Yard again. Then he turned his back on The Yard, and ran after the others.



They were nearly at the traffic lights, when Tim looked back, and saw Sebastian running along behind them.

“Is Sebastian coming too?” he asked.

Melinda stopped. Sebastian ran up to Tim, and rubbed himself against Tim’s legs.

“It looks as if he is,” said Melinda.

“I’m glad,” said Tim. “Good old Sebastian!”

Sebastian began to purr.

“I’m glad, too,” said Melinda. “Sebastian will know how to find Alan Tremaine. The Strange Ones can always find each other.”

They went on.

When they came to the traffic lights, Melinda stopped. “You can slip on to a lorry here,” she said. “Some of the big ones will be going north. The drivers won’t be able to see you, so it should be easy.”

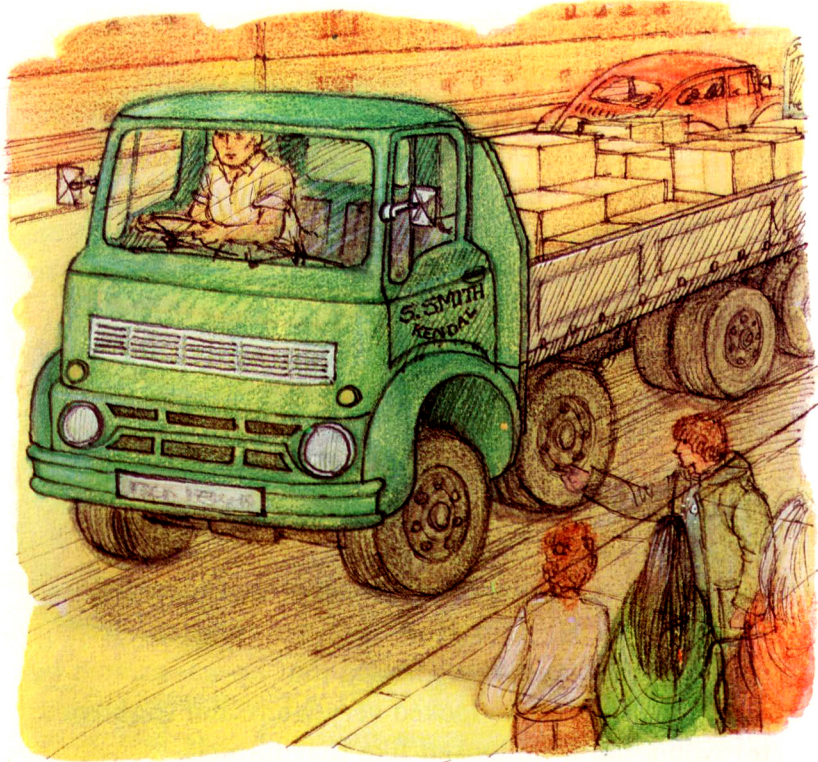
They waited on the pavement. People – ‘Ordinary Folk’, Melinda called them – were walking past them all the time, and Tim knew he must be invisible. He had to keep jumping out of their way.

“The wind witches will keep watch on the roads going north,” said Melinda. “So will their friends. So be careful, and look out for a tall, thin man, with one leg. His name is Mandrake, and he’s the worst of them all. He’s very dangerous.”

“I’ll remember,” said Tim.

The sun was shining, but the wind was blowing, and Tim felt cold. He looked at the two children. Jeremy looked cheerful, and Tim guessed that he was excited by the danger. But Nicola looked very white and frightened. Tim wondered if he looked like that himself.

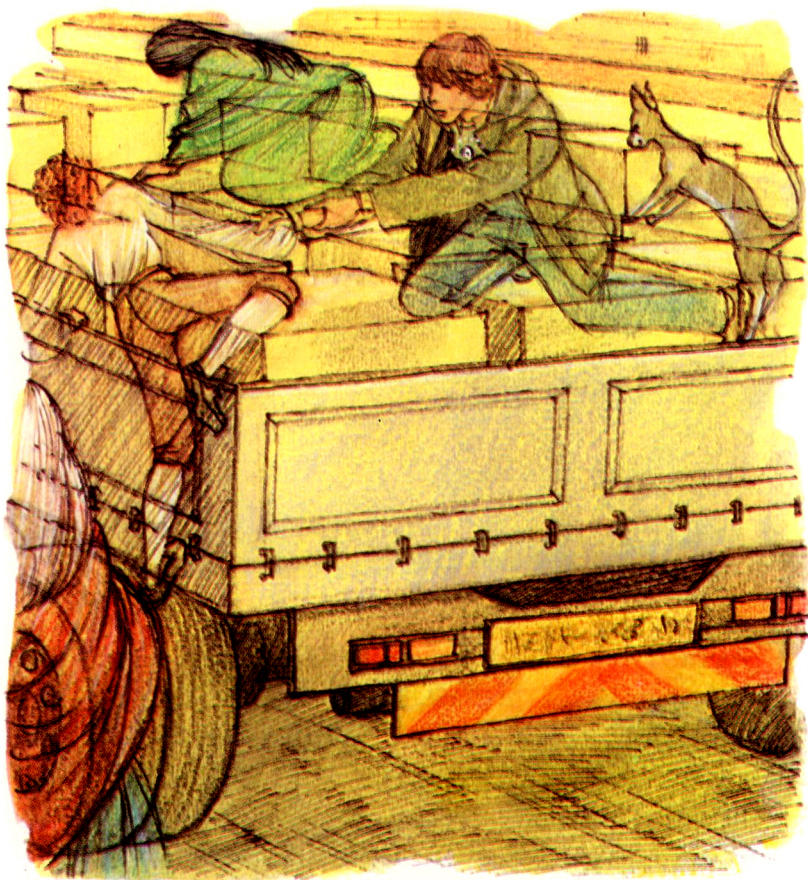
“Tim,” said Melinda. “Don’t be afraid. You’ll get the children to their grandfather, if anyone can. But if you can’t – if the wind witches and their friends stop you, then you can always save yourself. All you have to do, is to throw away the silver coin. If you do that, they will all vanish. Children, wind witches, the man with one leg – all of them will vanish, if you throw away the coin. It will be as if the wind had blown them all away, and you will never see them again.”



“I’ll get Nicola and Jeremy there somehow,” said Tim. “What about this lorry? That should take us north.”

A big lorry was slowing down to a stop, as the traffic lights turned to red. There were a lot of cardboard boxes in the back, but there was plenty of room for the three of them. ‘S. Smith, Kendal’, was painted on the door of the cab.

“Good,” said Melinda. “But remember to slip off before dark, to find somewhere to hide for the night.”

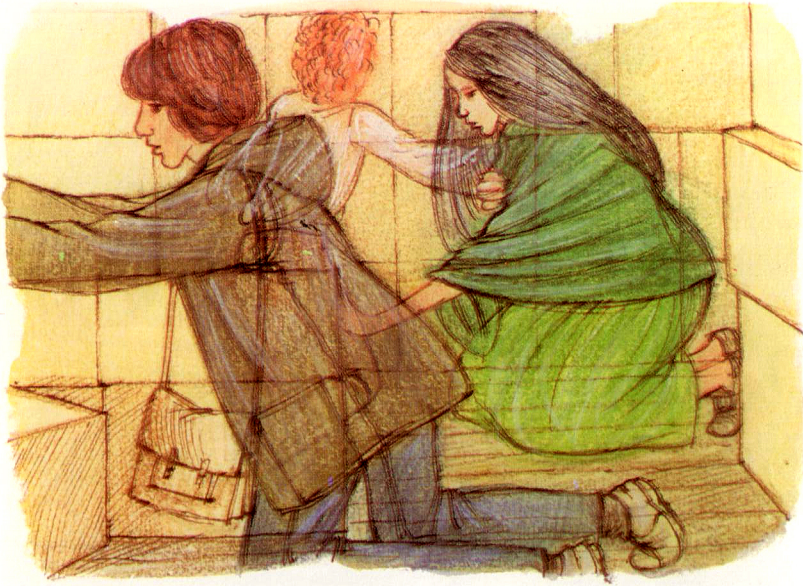


The lorry stopped. Tim, Nicola and Jeremy climbed up into the back. Sebastian jumped in after them.

The traffic lights changed to green.

The lorry started.

Melinda stood still on the pavement, watching, as the lorry pulled away.



As the lorry turned the corner, Tim heard Nicola give a little sob. But as he looked at her, she tossed back her long, dark hair, and turned to help him move the boxes. They pushed the boxes to the sides, and made a little room in the middle. When they were inside it, Tim pushed some of the boxes into the space at the back. Now they had a wall of boxes on every side, and Tim felt safer. He knew that the Ordinary Folk couldn't see them, but he was thinking of the Hidden People, watching the road.

They felt the lorry swing round a corner, and Tim guessed that they had turned on to the main road, and were going out of town. He could tell by the sun that they had turned north.

“I should try and sleep,” he said to Nicola. “There’s nothing else to do.”

Nicola nodded. She sat with her back against the boxes, and shut her eyes.

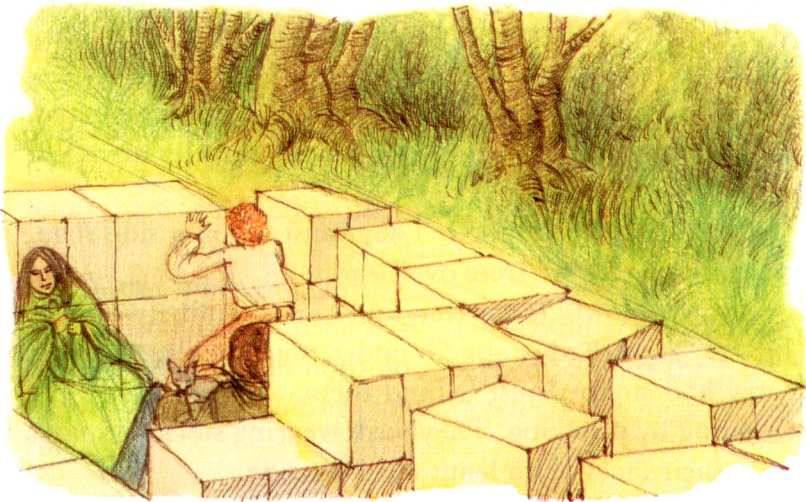
“I don’t want to sleep,” said Jeremy. “I’ll keep watch.”

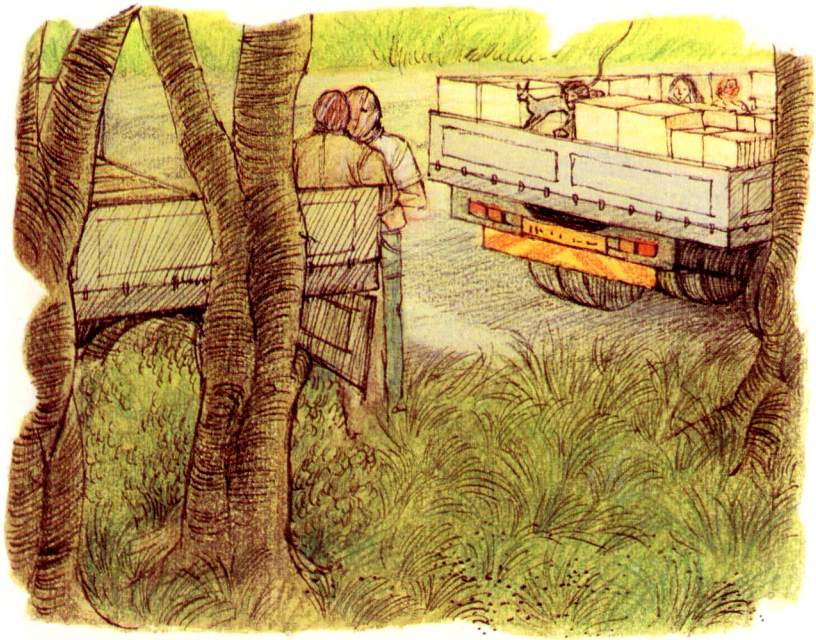
He pushed one of the boxes a little to one side, to make a window, and looked out.

“Tell me if you see anything strange,” said Tim. He sat down and leant back against the boxes.

Tim felt his own eyelids drop. He was tired. He felt warm again now, in the hot sun. They had a long ride ahead of them, and he didn’t know when they would get to sleep that night.

Sebastian climbed on to his lap, and purred. Tim fell asleep.





He woke with a jerk. For a moment Tim couldn't think where he was. Then he saw Nicola and Jeremy sitting up and rubbing their eyes, and he remembered. Sebastian was at the 'window', looking out. Jeremy must have been asleep too.

The lorry had stopped. They must be on a side road, because there were trees overhead.

Tim got slowly to his feet, and looked out between the boxes. They had stopped under some trees. Another lorry had stopped just behind them, and two men were standing by it talking. They were wearing stocking masks over their faces. Tim leant over the side.

As he watched, the men pulled off their masks. One was an older man. The other was a big man, in brown overalls.

A man with red hair climbed out of the cab of their own lorry, and jumped down into the road.

“I’ve got the driver all tied up,” said the man with red hair, as the other two joined him. “I’ve dumped him back in the cab. No one will see him there, unless they stop to look.”

“How is he?” asked the older man.

“He’s still knocked out,” said the man with red hair. “He won’t remember a thing. You gave him a real thump, Bert. Let’s get this stuff shifted before he comes round.”

“We’ll make a good bit of money on this run,” said the big man, called Bert. “The police won’t find this for an hour or two, on this road. We’ve got time to take the lot.”

“Let’s get the stuff shifted, then,” said the older man. “We don’t want to hang about.”

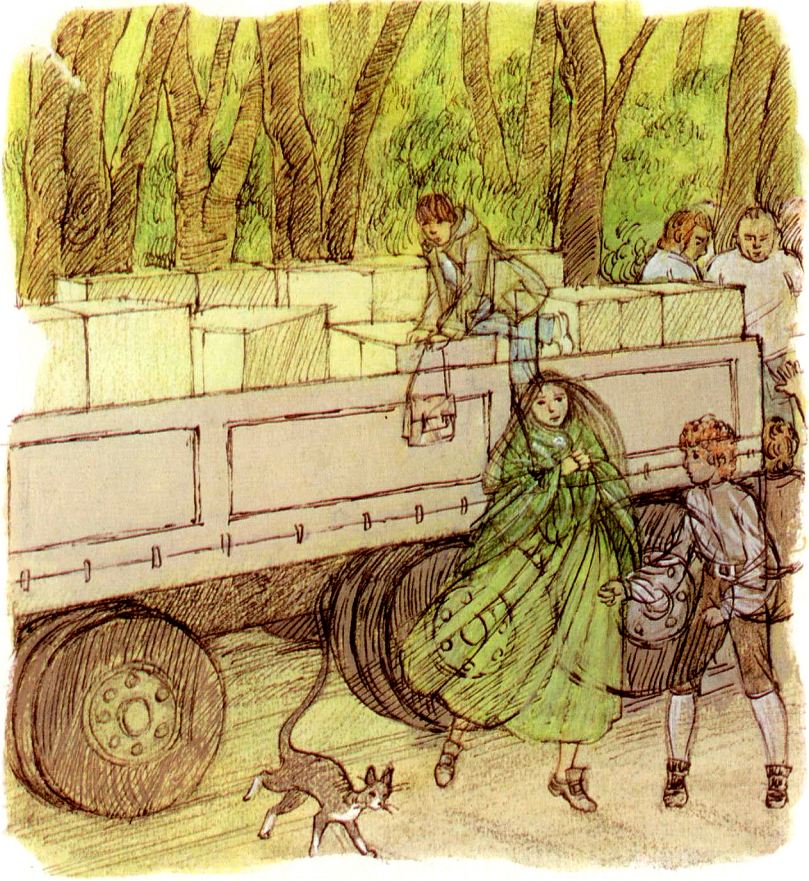
Bert let the tail board down, and climbed up on to the back of Tim’s lorry. He began to pick up the boxes, and hand them to the other two men.

“Don’t make a sound,” Tim whispered. “We’ll have to slip out when we can.”

It wasn’t going to be easy. Tim could see that. The boxes were piled on both sides of them, and at the back, the driver was handing boxes down to the men in the road.



Tim stood watching. Bert bent down to pick up a box. As he lifted it, he looked up, and his eyes met Tim's. He stood still for a moment, staring. Then, with a loud yell, he dropped the box, and leapt off the back of the lorry into the road. The box fell off the back after him, with a crash of breaking glass.



“Quick!” said Nicola. “Over the side, Tim!”

Tim turned. Nicola had pushed the boxes at the side along a little way. There was just room for them to slip through the gap.

“This way,” she whispered. “Into the wood, Tim. Quickly!”



Jeremy had already jumped down into the road. Nicola followed him, and Tim slipped through the gap after her.

There was a ditch at the side of the road, and then a little wood. The three of them jumped across the ditch, and ran in under the trees.

They could hear shouts on the road behind them, but no one followed them.

They ran on, until they came to some bushes. They threw themselves down behind the bushes, panting.

“What went wrong?” asked Tim, as soon as he had got his breath back.

“He could see you,” said Nicola. “It must be three hours since Melinda gave you those drops.”

“He could *almost* see you,” said Jeremy. “That’s the trouble. If he’d seen you, it wouldn’t have mattered so much. It can’t be quite three hours yet. You’re not *invisible* any longer, but you’re not quite *visible* yet! He could just see you – as if you were made of glass.”

Jeremy began to laugh. “That was good!” he said. “He thought you were a ghost!” Jeremy rolled over on the moss, laughing.

“How am I going to know when I’m invisible and when I’m not?” asked Tim. “I haven’t got a watch, and I can see myself all the time.”

“You can tell by the silver coin,” said Nicola. “You’ve got it around your neck, haven’t you? When you’re invisible, I can see the coin shining through your clothes. When you’re just ordinary, I can’t see the coin. Your clothes are too thick. They hide it. If you look down and you can’t see the coin, you’ll know that you’re not invisible any more.”

Tim looked down.

“I can’t see it at all,” he said. “So the men could see me now. Do you think they saw Sebastian, too? Where is he?”

There was a little purr, and Sebastian came through the bushes. He rubbed himself against Nicola's legs.

"Sebastian can make himself invisible when he wants to," said Nicola. "He's a Strange One. He doesn't have to take any drops."

"I'd better take some more," said Tim. "I've got to get to a telephone, and I don't want them to see me."

He took the bottle out of his pocket. He poured three drops into the golden cup, and drank them.

He looked down at his chest. He could see the silver coin, shining through his clothes.

"What do you want a telephone for?" asked Jeremy.

"Those men knocked out the driver of our lorry," said Tim. "Didn't you hear them say so? He may be hurt. I'll have to 'phone the police. Come on."

He got up, and led the way through the trees. They could hear the men on the road behind them, but no one followed them, and they soon came to a field at the other side of the wood.

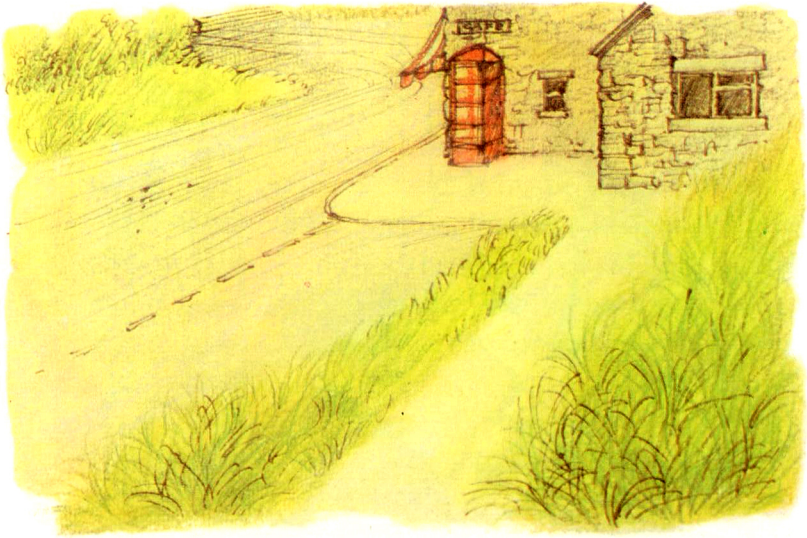
There was an old stone barn in the far corner of the field, and a gate leading on to a road.

"Come on," said Tim. "We haven't much time."

They ran across the field, and climbed over the gate.

Tim looked down the road. He could see another road not far away. A red telephone box stood at the corner, outside a little café.

"That's a bit of luck," he said. "You wait here. I won't be long."



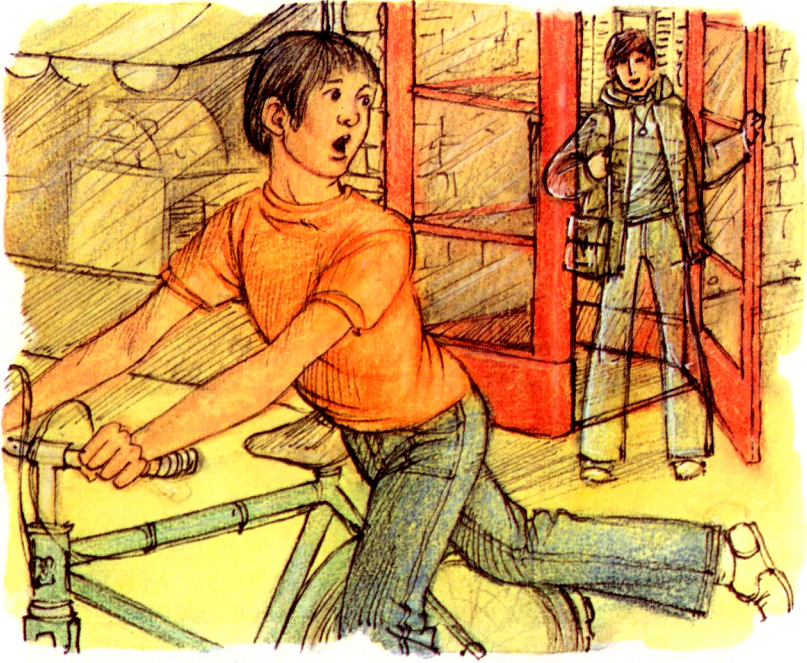
Tim ran down the road. There was a signpost at the corner, and a board saying 'Badgers' Cross'. Tim slipped inside the box, and dialled 999.

"Police," he said, when someone answered.

The man at the other end began to ask for his name, but Tim cut in.

"I can't tell you my name," he said. "But I'm 'phoning from a box at Badgers' Cross. There's another road near here, on the other side of a wood. There are some men on that road. One of them's got red hair. They've hi-jacked a lorry, and they've knocked out the driver. I think he's hurt. They've put him in the cab. They're stealing the load."

Tim put down the 'phone.



As he turned to go out of the box, he saw a boy with a bicycle standing outside. He was staring at the telephone.

For a moment, Tim thought the boy had seen him, but then he remembered that he was invisible.

“He must have seen the ’phone hanging in the air all by itself,” thought Tim. “I don’t wonder he’s frightened. He’ll be more frightened in a minute, too.”

He opened the door of the telephone box.

The boy let out a loud yell, jumped on to his bicycle, and pedalled off down the road as hard as he could.

Tim ran back to the others.

Nicola and Jeremy were sitting on the gate, waiting for him.

“What happened to the boy with the bike?” asked Jeremy.

“He thought there was a ghost in the telephone box,” said Tim. “He couldn’t see me, but he saw the telephone working by itself. And then the door opened. We’d better get away from here. The police will be here soon, too.”

As Tim spoke they heard a car coming towards them, travelling very fast. A police car shot past them, turned at the corner by the telephone, and shot off down the road.

“It’ll be dark soon,” said Nicola. “The sun’s beginning to set.”

Tim looked at the sky. Nicola was right. The sun was going down behind the wood. He remembered what Melinda had said. “Find somewhere indoors to sleep, when the sun goes down. Get under a roof if you can, even if it’s only a barn.”

He looked at the old stone barn in the corner of the field. It looked just the right place for them. There was a wooden door with some stone steps beside it leading up the outside of the barn to another door high up in the wall.

“Let’s see if we can get in there for the night,” said Tim. “Come on.”

“The wind has dropped again,” said Jeremy. “Melinda must have worked another spell. But it’s going to be cold. I’m cold now.”



Nicola shivered.

“I don’t mind the cold,” she said, “just as long as there isn’t a wind. Then the wind witches can’t fly north.”

They went over to the barn, opened the door, and looked in. The barn was clean and dry and empty.

“Let’s see what’s upstairs,” said Tim. “I want to find some hay. We daren’t light a fire.”

They shut the lower door, and went up the stone steps with Sebastian at their heels.

As soon as he opened the top door, Tim knew that they had found the right place. The top of the barn was half full of hay. Nicola and Jeremy went into the top of the barn to explore, and Tim went down the steps again, to find a big stone to put inside the door.

By the time he came back, Nicola and Jeremy had found a comfortable place, in among the bales of hay. They sat down, and pulled some of the hay round them, to keep warm. They were all hungry. They ate the last cakes and apples, and all the cheese and biscuits and chocolate. “We’ll be much safer, sleeping here,” said Tim.

Nicola nodded. “I know we will,” she said. “But there’s something about the barn I don’t like. I don’t know what it is, Tim. It makes me feel queer.” She shivered.

“I expect you’re still cold,” said Tim. “Anyway, we’ll get up as soon as it’s light. We’ve got to find another lorry, going north.”

It was dark inside the barn. There was only one small window, and that was covered with cobwebs. Outside the barn, the light was beginning to fade.

They had all slept that afternoon, but they were all tired. Jeremy was asleep almost as soon as he had finished his supper. Nicola pulled some loose hay over him, to keep him warm, and then lay down herself. Sebastian curled up into a ball. Tim wondered if he should keep watch, but he knew he was too tired to stay awake. He lay down in the hay, and fell asleep.



When Tim opened his eyes, it was still dark. Something had woken him. He sat up. The moon was shining in at the window, and he could see Sebastian standing at his feet in the moonlight. Sebastian's eyes were shining, and his tail was waving. Sebastian must have woken him. But why?

Tim heard a strange sound below him. There was someone down below them in the barn.

Jeremy and Nicola were still sleeping. Very softly, Tim got to his feet. Sebastian turned, and led the way to the other end of the barn. There was no hay at the far end—just bare boards. The boards were old, and there were wide cracks in between them. Tim could see light shining through the cracks, and he could hear strange sounds down below.

Very softly, he lay down on the floor. He shut one eye and looked down with the other through a wide crack between two boards.



Seven witches were sitting in the barn below him. They had red skirts and silver cloaks, and long hair falling down over their shoulders. They were sitting in a ring. Each witch had a tall, pointed red hat on the floor beside her, and each witch had a candle with a strange blue flame in front of her. In the middle of the ring there was an old weather-cock. It had been pushed into the ground. Tim could see the letters on it, N S E W, for north, south, east and west. They were made of metal, and shone in the light of the blue candle flames. A white cock was standing in the middle of the letters. As Tim looked, the cock moved his head. He was a real, live cock! Tim could see his eyes shining.

The witches began to whistle. It was a strange high sound, and seemed to come from very far away.

Suddenly, one of the witches stood up. She tossed back her cloak, and took something out of a sack on the floor. She held it out in the candle light, and Tim saw that it was an ivory dragon.

The witch holding the dragon began to sing.

The whistling grew louder and louder, but Tim could still hear the words of the song.

“Crow, cock, crow!

Blow, wind, blow!” sang the witch.

“Crow, cock crow!

Blow, wind, blow!

As fire flames out of the dragon’s mouth,

The wind will blow, the wind from the south!

Crow, cock, crow!”



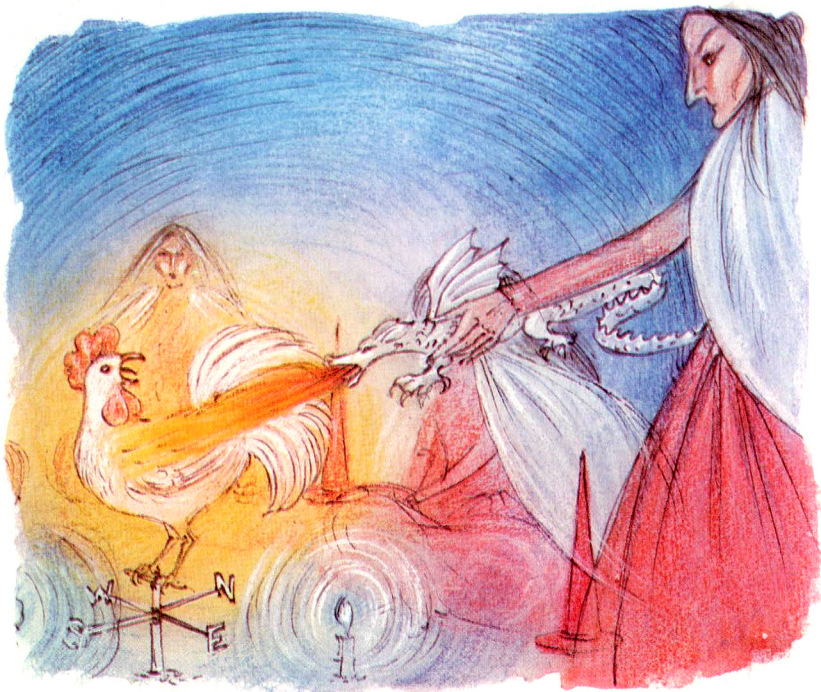
As she cried “Crow, cock, crow!” for the third time, a long flame of fire streamed out of the mouth of the ivory dragon, towards the white weather cock.

The cock opened its beak, and began to crow.

There was a strange whistling sound outside the barn. It seemed to come in answer to the witches. Tim heard the window shake. The door in the wall below him blew open, and a great gust of wind blew into the barn.

The dragon’s fire died away.

The seven blue candle flames were blown out, and everything was dark.



Tim sat up slowly. Sebastian ran to the window. Tim followed him, and looked out, staring up into the sky.

The seven witches were out there, riding the wind. Up they went, high up into the sky, with their silver cloaks blowing out like sails in front of them, and their tall red hats pointing towards the stars.



Then they turned north, high up over the roof of the barn, and were gone.

Tim went slowly back to his place in the hay. Nicola and Jeremy were still sleeping. Tim thought that they must have been very tired, to sleep through all the whistling and the wind.

He sat down on a bale of hay. There was a little “Rrrr?” at his feet, and Sebastian rubbed himself against Tim’s legs. Tim bent down and picked him up.

“I don’t know what to do, Sebastian,” Tim said. “But there’s nothing we can do tonight. We may as well try and get back to sleep. The south wind has begun to blow, and the wind witches have passed us. They’re flying north.”



FLIGHTPATH TO READING

A Series

1. Tim and Tobias
2. All the Fun of the Fair
3. Tim Meets Captain Jory
4. Tim and the Smugglers
5. Tim and the Witches
6. The Highwayman
7. Magic in The Yard
8. The Key

B Series

1. The Return of the Key
2. Captain Jory Lends a Hand
3. The Stump People
4. Watchers in The Yard
5. Red for Danger
6. At the House of the Safe Witch
7. Tim in Hiding
8. On the Night of the Full Moon

C Series

1. The Pool by the Whispering Trees
2. Tim in Trouble
3. On the Road to the North
4. Riding into Danger
5. Mandrake's Castle
6. Escape by Night
7. Three Fires on the Dark Tower
8. Tim Rides on the Ghost Bus

D Series

1. News from the North
2. The Cry in the Dark
3. The Shield Stone
4. The Storm over the Sea
5. The Cave of the Wind Witches
6. In Diaman's Cave
7. Danger on the Moor
8. At the Hill of the Stone Prisons

Flightpath to Reading C3

